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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study of a small rural high school in upstate New York investigated students' perceptions of safety at school and empowered students to develop solutions to school violence. A mixed-methods approach drew on action research, youth-based phenomenology, and a general systems frame of reference. Data collection included two surveys of 10th-grade students; several focus groups; and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. By chance, the two surveys were conducted before and after the violent events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Students questioned whether adults in the school truly cared about them as people, felt that adults were unaware of what was going on in the school, and repeatedly expressed a need for more adult presence and intervention to increase students' sense of safety. Students described various types of bullying, including teasing and sexual harassment by peers and verbal intimidation by teachers, and pointed out the connections between bullying and the Columbine violence. Peer predictability and familiarity enhanced students' sense of safety, and this familiarity was enhanced by the school's small size. Students were opposed to high-tech solutions to school security and offered many suggestions, including ways of promoting a sense of belonging, moral and character education, and numerous points of building design. Policy implications are discussed with regard to bullying, school size, supervision, teachers' responsibility, and student participation in decision making. (Contains 31 references.) (SV)

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Adolescents' Perceptions of Safety at School And Their Solutions for Enhancing Safety and Reducing School Violence: A Rural Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Although adolescents are the primary targets of bullying and violence in schools, their opinions about this national problem are rarely elicited. This exploratory case study of an upstate New York rural high school investigated the perceptions of students about safety at school from a mixed methods approach. By chance, the research captured pre and post Littleton, Colorado data in the form of surveys, individual interviews and focus groups. Using action research, youth-based phenomenology, and a general systems frame of reference, the study highlights themes relevant to adolescents about the safety or hostility of their work environment- the school. The inquiry explored the possibility that schools may be inadvertently perpetuating hostile climates through the maintenance of unhealthy systemic behavioral patterns. Due to the action research approach, the study provided a voice for empowerment of students in their primary social setting for local policy change. It is the premise of the inquiry that despite the events of violence at rural schools such as Paducah, Jonesboro, and Springfield, few researchers are asking the primary stakeholders, the children, for input about their concerns relative to safety or for input regarding solutions for preventing school violence. The study has implications for educational policy decisions.

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Introduction

Current research on school safety and violence is replete with examples, opinions, and solutions based almost exclusively on inquiries conducted with adults. One example is the Principal/ School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, 1997. As an exploratory case study, this inquiry endeavored to bring into sharp focus the issues and variables attendant to school safety from the perspective of adolescents. Conducted with high school students in a small rural upstate New York community, themes, interactions, and issues emerged that are critical to adolescents for a sense of security in their primary work setting- the school.

In discussions of children and safety at school, there is the time before Columbine and the time after the tragic event at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Despite the fact that there were prior fatal school shootings, both urban and rural, Columbine is the national demarcation point in the debate about school safety and violence. A sense of innocence or naivete about the sanctity of America's schools was lost that day- April 20, 1999. Before the intense and very well-publicized tragedy, most Americans were able to dismiss any reports of school violence as merely random, and therefore, not consequential to their own insulated lives. After Littleton, parents asked the questions: Why aren't our schools safe? Why are children shooting each other at school?

General system theory was utilized in considering adolescents in the context of their workplace -the school- and in understanding the implications of the findings. The research investigated factors that contribute to secondary school students' sense of safety in a rural school and it also examined variables that contribute to aggressive behaviors at school. The students were full research partners and hearing the voices of the children themselves is one of the major contributions of the project. At this time, students are still not regular contributors to the discourse on improving school safety.

Purpose

A rural high school was chosen as the setting for the inquiry because prior to the events at Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999, most other major incidents of school shootings that received media attention in the last several years had occurred in rural schools (Bender, Clinton, & Bender, 1999). Further, considerable research had already been undertaken on the topic of school security and violence in urban areas. As stated above, the primary purpose of the study was to hear the voices of the students, themselves, on this profound topic. Their thinking about what constituted or compromised safety at school and *their* solutions for a secure environment were at the heart of the investigation.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to address the research questions concerning adolescents' thinking about safety in rural schools. Utilizing a researcher-developed survey in combination with focus groups and individual interviews allowed for an in-depth action research approach for this study. The nature of this mixed-method integrated design was iterative and holistic. The use of different methodologies provided the opportunity for several iterations of interpretation and approaches to the data.

Action research and youth-based phenomenology, as I have designated the process in this inquiry, were methodologies central to the undertaking. Action research with adolescents is especially important in terms of offering them a voice for empowerment within their primary systems. The principles and ethics of action research with regard to valuing 'the other' and empowerment are clearly compatible with adolescent developmental needs.

Youth-based phenomenology is a term that indicates research conducted employing a child or adolescent phenomenological perspective. This case study applied a youth-based

phenomenological approach to gain greater insight into adolescents' perceptions of safety at school than customary studies have obtained in the past.

General system theory as originally postulated by von Bertalanffy (1968) and as more recently applied to organizations by others (Warren, Franklin, & Streeter, 1998; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993) informed my thinking about the school as a system and was instrumental in the analysis of the data, both quantitative and qualitative.

Setting

This study was conducted at a small rural high school in upstate New York. The school consisted of approximately 500 students in total. It is described as a commuter community for a major university and nearby colleges. Consequently, the school had a mix of children whose parents were farmers or had other rural occupations, or whose parents were employed at the university or colleges. The graduating class was comprised of an average of 100 students each year. Approximately 10% of adolescents at the high school qualified for the free lunch program in any given year and an average of 75% of graduates go on for post-secondary education from every senior class. While the students, for the most part, came from middle-income homes, there was a small percentage whose families lived at the poverty level. These children were not expected by their families to attend college and did not receive much support for attending high school, according to the principal. The school was selected based on meeting the criteria of rurality, accessibility, interest in the issue of school safety, and willingness to partner in the interchange necessary for action research.

The following table represents everyone in the rural town who was employed over sixteen years of age, at the time of the study, including those who were self-employed:

Table 1. Occupational Categories of People Sixteen and Older

.25	educational services
.143	wholesale or retail sales
.120	manufacturing of durable and non-durable goods
.090	health service occupations
.071	other professional and related services
.066	construction industry
.062	finance, insurance, and real estate
.058	agriculture, forestry and fisheries
.035	public administration
.030	business and repair services
.026	communications and other public utilities
.024	personal services
.013	entertainment and recreation services
.010	transportation
.001	mining

The figures above represent the total of all people in town over age sixteen who were employed in 1999. The median household income in 1989 was $31, 667. and in 1999 was $50,178. The town consisted of 1,123 families or 1,602 households. Of these, 7.31% lived below the poverty line in this rural upstate New York town.

Sample

Adolescents were the sample population because the majority of violence in schools is at the middle and high school levels. Tenth grade students constituted the sample for the survey portion of the research. They were chosen, after conferring with several secondary school educators, based on their unique position in the typical high school experience. Freshmen were deemed to bring their own set of fears to the experience of high school. This comes about as a result of simply being in their first year in the building and carrying presuppositions about high

school. By junior year, some students have the option of dropping out of school in New York State because they have reached the age of 16 prior to entering their 3rd year of school. Those who do drop out sometimes represent adolescents who have encountered problems such as harassment and other forms of violence that they have elected to avoid by opting out of the formal school experience (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Seniors were thought to have figured out most of the interactions of the system and have the most power of all the students. Therefore safety issues, while still a concern, were postulated to affect seniors to a lesser degree than the other students. These formulations about the students and the appropriate grade for the inquiry were established from discussions with various teachers and the principal. There were approximately 125 tenth grade students at the school and all were required to take global studies. Sixty-two tenth grade students in global studies classes were selected to participate in the survey portion of the study. The students were in three different classes and the classes were selected from the five classes of one of the global studies teachers. The classes were selected as a result of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Most students in the study were ages fifteen and sixteen; one student was twelve years old and one participant was eighteen at the time of the second survey.

Three focus groups were convened for the study. The first focus group was comprised of students who had participated in the survey portion of the inquiry. All of the students in this group were in the 10th grade. In the second focus group, there was one student who had previously taken the questionnaire. Students from the second focus group came from all grade levels. None of the participants in the third focus group had been a part of the original two survey administrations. Similar to the second group, students in the third focus group represented all grades from freshmen to senior.

Students from all grade levels were represented in the individual interviews based on the information gathered during the focus groups. It was determined that representatives from all

grade levels were needed to capture the full voice of the students on the issues raised in the surveys.

The exact same survey was administered twice to the same students--once on November 17, 1998 and again on May 5, 1999, two weeks after the violent incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Co. During that traumatic event, twelve students and one teacher were shot and killed by two fellow students who took their own lives in the school at the end of the shooting spree. This portion of the research comprised an opportunity for a pre and post-test design model. The second survey was followed by a focus group on May 20, 1999. The focus groups represent purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). The first focus group (n = 26) consisted of tenth grade students previously polled for the survey. They were selected by their global studies teacher for participation in the focus group based on interest and likelihood of partnership with the research concerns. Given the overall action research paradigm of the study, the ability and willingness of the students to share in all aspects of the discourse was critical. The second focus group consisted of students who acted as an advisory group to the principal. He designated this group, the Student Advisory Council. It included students who were typically leaders and/ or top academic achievers. The principal was unusual in that he had maintained a student advisory council at the high school for over ten years in order to hear the voices of the students and to keep himself informed regarding student issues. The principal was eager for me to meet with this group of students and felt that their perspective was important for me to hear (n = 16). The third focus group (n = 8) represented a subset who were not represented in either of the other two groups. They were considered the "at-risk" students by the principal and by other school personnel.

Individual interviews were conducted in order to follow up on some of the themes and questions that emanated from the focus group processes and data. Individual interviews also provided a forum for students who do not feel comfortable speaking out in a group format.

Individuals were selected to represent various sub-groupings within the school population, for example, high achievers, average achievers, and at-risk students, and male and female students.

Basic Design

Quantitative data were collected through the administration of a researcher-designed survey regarding adolescents' perceptions of safety at their school. Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups and individual interviews with students, teachers, and administrators in the district. Specifically, the adolescents in the sample participated by filling out a Likert-type survey on two separate occasions (as it happens, pre and post Littleton, CO). Then some of those students joined in one of three focus group experiences, and engaged in individual interviews with the researcher, as indicated above. The quantitative portion of the study was based on 54 paired data sets of tenth grade students.

During the process of the inquiry, the students and I actively engaged in the interpretation of all collected data. The goal of the research design was to generate dependable knowledge to which all of the learning and research partners (students, administrators, teachers) contributed to effectively enhance the safety of the school environment.

Data Collection

Survey

A researcher-designed Likert-type survey was used for quantitative data collection. Initial impetus for the original design of the survey came from the desire to gain insight into the perceptions of adolescents in their school environment and to hear their voices. Further impetus was created by the lack of availability of an existing instrument. Those questionnaires that were obtainable did not provide feedback from an adolescent's perspective or were asking for factual

information only (e.g. – Are there weapons at your school? Do you know where to buy drugs on your campus?) The questionnaire for this study consisted of 38 inquiries with answers on a 5–point scale and 6 questions that were open-ended in nature. It took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was given during class time. It was designed to be administered without a teacher or other school official present, but in the presence of the researcher who would remain unobtrusively available to answer any queries that arose. The instrument was pilot tested on several high school students before its use with the sample population of sophomores (n = 62, 11-17-98 and n = 60, 5-5-99). Unidimensional scaling was critical to the development of the instrument in order to capture the constructs of adolescents' perceptions of safety and to enhance the likelihood of validity and reliability of the survey.

The survey focused on the following categories:

1. adolescents' sense of safety in the classroom
2. adolescents' sense of safety on the school bus
3. adolescents' sense of safety in the hallways
4. adolescents' sense of safety in the restrooms
5. adolescents' sense of safety in the cafeteria
6. students' perceptions of teachers', or other adults', awareness of conflicts between students
7. students' perceptions of teachers', or other adults', willingness to intervene in order to prevent harm to students

There also were questions that probed the students' beliefs about conflict resolution in the school, the students' sense of safety in other areas of the school grounds, the students' level of worry during the school day, and whether the students had been physically hurt at school.

Focus Groups

Three focus groups were the follow up to the surveys that were distributed to the tenth grade students. One focus group was conducted on May 20, 1999 (n = 26), another on November 17, 1999 (n = 16) and the last group was held on February 17, 2000 (n = 8).

Templeton (1994) describes the focus group as "a small, temporary community, formed for the purpose of the collaborative enterprise of discovery" (p.4). She believes that those in attendance should be those who have "discerned the problem," who feel it most, and who will be involved in implementing solutions (p. 11). Her philosophy for implementing focus groups is very much in keeping with that of action researchers (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Many adolescents tend to be more comfortable responding in a group than in individual interviews. Of course, some are reluctant to share their views in front of the group. Consequently two things are needed: interviewer expertise with adolescent groups, and individual sessions. There are several approaches for helping adolescents feel safe enough to share their thoughts. Primary among them is the sincerity and true respect that the researcher brings to the work with teenagers. As noted previously, some children are reluctant to voice their thinking and feelings in a group situation and that must be respected by the interviewer. If their reluctance is not respected, the whole group will respond negatively to any perceived coercion or perceived disrespectful behavior on the part of the interviewer. It is important to convey to adolescents that they are actively co-constructing knowledge with you and that their help is critical to the overall outcome of the study.

Based on the data received from the students in the first two focus groups, another focus group was conducted in February 2000. The purpose of this group was to hear the voices and opinions of another constituency in the high school- the at-risk students. The principal described these adolescents as children who were marginalized in the school, typically from the lowest socio-economic category, and whose families worked at minimum wage jobs.

The issues explored in all three focus groups were derived from the initial surveys and also evolved from data collected from each successive group. The primary issues investigated were the students' sense of safety in various areas of the building and in various relationships at school. These included relationships with teachers and staff as well as with one another. The issue of adults to whom students could turn for help was discussed. The notion of belonging to a group and its relationship to feelings of security was considered. The idea of whose job or responsibility it was for a safe school was addressed.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and administrators for this case study. It was imperative to gain the perspective of the teachers and administration, though that was not the primary focus of the study, in order to understand how the system functioned in toto around issues of students and safety. Confidentiality was extended to each person and was a critical component of the work.

Student Interviews

A semi-structured interview format was used for each student interview. The students who were interviewed represented a cross sample of groups in the school from the high academic achievers or class leaders, to the middle-of-the-road academic students to the at-risk population of students. Individual interviews were held with students who represented various sub-groups in the school. Student leaders as well as students who were considered "not connected" to the school (as described by the school administrators) had an opportunity to share their perceptions and strategies. According to qualitative researcher, Jennifer Greene (personal communications, June 14 and July 16, 1999), this stratification in measuring themes and

responses was an important component of the research based on the feedback provided by both surveys and by the first focus group. Once various sub-groups of students were identified, the principal and the guidance personnel culled a representative sample of students for me to interview. A letter requesting parental consent was mailed to all of the parents or guardians of the students. In total, twelve individual student interviews were conducted. They included 7 girls and 5 boys ranging in age from 14 to 18 years old. Six of the participants were sophomores, three were freshman, two were in the 11th grade, and one student was a senior. Seven of the students had previously participated in one of the three focus groups conducted at the school. Six of the twelve adolescents classified themselves as athletes and that was consistent with the school's description of them as well. Two of the "at risk" adolescents were athletes.

Teacher and Administrator Interviews

Over the course of the project, teachers were interviewed formally regarding their thoughts and opinions on the topic of school safety or school violence in general, and on their impressions of their school in particular. Some teachers were interviewed informally during casual meetings on site. In order to gain a representative view of teachers' perspectives, the principal offered the names of several teachers he thought would be willing to participate and who exemplified various places on the spectrum from conservative to liberal in their thinking about issues of school safety.

Over the eighteen months of the research project, I met with the principal on numerous occasions to plan the three focus groups and the individual interviews and to discuss his opinions on the subject of school safety. I also attended a monthly school meeting regarding the at-risk population in the school. Present at these regular meetings were the principal, the dean of students, a representative from the local vocational program, the school psychologist, the school nurse, and two school guidance counselors. From this two-hour meeting and other informal

meetings with some of its members, I obtained a clear perspective on the way in which the administration thought about teenagers and the way in which the administrators directed the system. In addition, I had the opportunity for a two-hour meeting with the superintendent of the school district. The meeting provided considerable insight into how he conceived of the issues of school violence and safety.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

A high degree of reliability was demonstrated in the comparison of data from the first quantitative set to the second. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate reliability of the instrument and the data collected in this inquiry. Factor analysis was employed to determine validity of the data collected. Using Principal Component Analysis for the extraction method for the factor analysis, the initial Eigenvalues support the seven components or constructs that the survey was purporting to measure. Looking at the Component Matrix, it was clear that the constructs cluster, for the most part, at the .5 level or greater, indicating that construct validity could be claimed by the instrument. The survey instrument had a very high (.86) overall reliability estimate as determined by Cronbach's alpha. All quantitative data were subjected to frequency and multiple factor analysis. Data were cross-tabulated to determine the differences between male and female students' perceptions of safety in all domains. Frequency distributions were obtained to demonstrate the categorical and cumulative percentages of students answering specific inquiries. Rotated factor analysis was helpful in identifying if another dimension or construct was showing up in the questions about the classroom. The classroom subset focused heavily on teacher awareness and teacher behavior. Unidimensional scaling was clearly accomplished based on the data analysis of the surveys. Consequently, inferences were drawn based on the analysis of these data (Trochim, 1997).

Qualitative Analysis

A qualitative analysis of data attempts to reveal the multiple meanings held for any given phenomenon (Greene, 1999a; Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Greenwood & Lewin, 1998; Patton, 1990). The qualitative data were classified and categorized using an adaptation of a combination of strategies utilized by researchers Renata Tesch (1995), Harry Wolcott (1994), Michael Patton (1990), Miles and Huberman (1984), and social casework studies. In order to assure credibility, authenticity, and coherence, the data were collected and repeatedly presented to the students as my research partners. During these member checks, students would confirm, deny or revise the findings, and they would voice their own interpretations. To further substantiate credibility, authenticity, and coherence, two colleagues with background in the area of children and schools reviewed the findings and interpretations. This triangulation helped maintain coherence in the qualitative data analysis.

The available research on focus group sessions makes a good case for using focus groups in working with and for adolescents about complex issues such as school safety and violence prevention.

Results

Quantitative data results

Comparing the survey data showed statistically significant differences between male and female students from pre-Littleton to the post-Littleton implementation of the questionnaire. These differences raise some interesting questions about the variation in perceptions between male and female students around issues pertaining to safety. All quantitative data were t-tested and analyzed as a paired data set. Surveys were matched according to birth date, gender, and sometimes handwriting to ensure matched pairs. Once paired in this way, 54 matches were

made. Of that number, 29 were female and 25 were male.

In the paired analysis of the data for the Fall and the Spring, the following questions illustrate significant change from the pre to the post test:

Question #20 "Students behave respectfully towards one another while passing in the hallways."

Question #25 "I feel safe in the restrooms between classes."

Question #33b "The adults in the school are aware if anyone is making the cafeteria unsafe."

Question #34 "I can count on it that the adults in the school would stop someone from hurting me or anyone else in the cafeteria."

The mean changes on the questions above are represented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Changes in Perception of Safety for All Respondents Pre and Post Littleton as Measured by Paired t-test

Question	Fall (pre-Littleton)	Spring (post-Littleton)
#20	3.2	2.9
#25	2.2	1.8
#33b	3.0	3.4
#34	2.1	2.4
Composite		
For Cafeteria	13.5	14.7

These findings are all statistically significant with an alpha of .05. Questions #20 and #25 indicate that the students felt a noticeable difference, on the positive side, in respectful behavior in the hallways from the fall (before Littleton) to the spring (after Littleton). Students felt that their behavior was more respectful towards one another in the hallways after Littleton than

before the shooting.

The data also point out that the students experienced a greater level of safety in the restrooms between classes from the fall to the spring. Conversely, the data displayed in the table above (Table 2) attest to the idea that students experienced the cafeteria as less safe after Littleton than before. This was evident in the mean scores shift in questions #33b, #34, and the composite score for the total domain of the cafeteria.

It is difficult to determine hypotheses from these data for the important changes in the students' perceptions of safety at school before Littleton and after Littleton. It is important to remember that it is very possible that the changes are regression to the mean artifacts or that the changes registered above are reflecting true perceptual shifts or both. Consequently, the qualitative data results are important in attempting to refine any interpretations from the surveys.

Qualitative data results

Several themes emerged as a result of the action research process with the students which included three different focus groups and individual interviews. Interviews were also conducted with teachers and school administrators. Data from the interviews with adults supported the themes that emerged in talking with the adolescents.

Among the themes were what I have termed Institutional Caring, Interpersonal Respect, and Peer Predictability. Further, the students offered many creative solutions of their own for enhancing the safety of all schools.

Institutional Caring

Students questioned whether adults in the school truly cared about them as people. This

was important to them on several levels, but it had a direct impact on their sense of security in the building and on the campus. Many students felt that teachers, staff, and administrators were unaware of what was happening in the school, offered inadequate supervision of various areas of the building and grounds, and were unwilling to intervene in physical disputes that arose. As a result, they questioned whether or not the adults would do anything to protect them in the event of a major catastrophe like the one that occurred in Littleton, Colorado.

One of the most unexpected findings of the inquiry was the repeated sentiment by the students that adults—teachers, administrators, and other support staff—are needed and their presence and intervention is required in order for the students to feel safe at school. Some adult presence in the school is understood to be necessary by all teachers, administrators, and parents. However, the extent to which adolescents desire adult supervision, intervention, and awareness of the interactions of students in the school, on the school grounds, and on the bus may have been underappreciated by adults, according to the data from this study.

The students were asked the following question specifically about adult awareness: "Do you think that the teachers and other adults in this school are aware of what's going on in the school?" Here are some responses:

I don't think they have a clue. They don't choose to really care (Molly, age 15).

The teachers often have no clue about things going on in school. They are unaware if someone is about to hurt someone else (female, 5-20-99 survey).

No… because sometimes there's fights and the teachers are not aware of it, like this morning at morning break. Well, when they walk around, they just walk around the halls, minding their own business (Lizzie, 15).

Some do, but I know others who don't. I have some teachers who have no idea of what goes on in their class. It's the type of people they are…they're not aware people. [One teacher] you can get away with a lot of stuff and she has no idea. Like cheating and stuff like that (Josh, 15).

Interpersonal Respect

Numerous forms of bullying exist in our schools (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999).

Some of it is named and some of the bullying still goes unnamed and therefore misunderstood (Olweus, 1993). Sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and intimidation by teachers and other adults are categories of bullying that take place during the school day (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2000; Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Gorney, 1999; National Association of Attorneys General, 2000; Pollack & Schuster, 2000). We have only recently begun to recognize sexual harassment as an inappropriate and damaging activity for our youth as opposed to merely a rite of passage in adolescence (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2000; Gorney, 1999). Other forms of harassment such as verbal abuse and intimidation by adults are, unfortunately, still areas of debate among professionals and educators as to their significance and detrimental effects on children.

The students' opinions about teasing or harassment were elicited by the question: How do you feel about teasing?

I can see where that kind of stuff would do something bad. Some kids wouldn't know how to react to that (teasing) and might do something violent. Everyone gets teased sometimes—I don't know. I haven't really noticed anyone taking it strange or anything (Josh, 15).

I feel fine about it cause it's sort of a way of breaking the ice and people get talking (Steve, 16).

Go to any high school, full of teenagers. There's bound to be disrespect (male, 3rd focus group).

There will always be people who put other kids down to make them(selves) feel superior. There will always be a popular group. There will always be the nerds, you know (female, 2nd group).

Kids say stuff. You've just got to ignore it and go on with your life (Marianne, 15).

Some people are really rude and disrespectful. They make fun of people. Sometimes they try to push people around. You can get a nervous feeling in your stomach. There are other people that it happens to everyday. I see a lot of people who are picked on everyday and stuff. I don't know if they feel it (unsafe). A lot of people just try to ignore it. *I think it takes a really mentally strong person to just try to ignore it and forget it immediately* (emphasis added). And I don't think many people do. Does it (getting picked on) happen to you? Sometimes. I try to ignore it. I'll ignore it and think about it later. Then it comes back. It depends on the person. Usually I can put up with it for a pretty long time then I just get to the point where I just get sick of it so I like tell him off and say something to somebody until it stops. And then it does stop? Sometimes (Warren, 15).

While the students above seem to have their own strategies for coping with teasing, and some of them are probably the instigators themselves (like Steve, 16), many of the adolescents did not enjoy teasing and saw it as bullying behavior. The girls, in particular, commented about

the inappropriate nature of sexual comments and about this form of harassment as they dealt with every day at school. However, several boys also commented on their questionnaires about sexual harassment in the locker rooms and in the restrooms. Further, there was a beginning awareness on the part of the students in the inquiry about the connections between bullying behavior and serious eruptions of violence. They knew of the comments made by Harris and Klebold (the shooters at Columbine) regarding their years of torment at the hands of their fellow students. Harris and Klebold felt that their revenge was justified based on being bullied by their peers for their four years of high school (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

Peer Predictability

Because adult supervision was lacking in the school, as discussed previously, one of the mechanisms that the adolescents developed to enhance their sense of safety was what I have called Peer Predictability. One of the basic elements of peer predictability for the students was the capability of knowing one another. Knowing the other students led to familiarity with the range of thinking and behaviors that typified each student. Once this spectrum of thinking and behaving was understood by the teenagers, then they felt they could fairly well predict the actions of their peers in all ways that were important, especially any that pertained to safety. Here are some examples of their thinking:

> If you know somebody, you know how they *are*… and **if something happens you know how they're going to react** to it. But like with the other kids that you don't know. You could say something and they could just go off and beat you up (emphasis added) (Crystal, 17).

The quote above by Crystal supports the concept of the impact of predictability through familiarity. She says, "if you know somebody, you know how they *are*." She emphasized that the advantage to this knowing is that you can be prepared for "how they are going to react" in

the future. This is a huge advantage in adolescent society as she points out. She stressed that if you do not know someone, a teenager runs the risk of saying the wrong thing. This could eventuate in being "beat up." The small size of the school she attended promoted her ability to know the other students well enough to predict their behaviors and therefore feel safe.

Trying for greater specificity from the students, I asked the following question: "What makes you personally feel safe at school?"

> I trust my friends. I know everybody (male, 3rd focus group).
>
> Knowing everybody. Knowing there's no one for me to be intimidated by. I know how to take it if somebody is hassling me (Tom, age 16).
>
> We all know each other. Like we don't threaten to kill each other. There isn't very much hatred in this school; there is some hatred. It shows, cause there's this kid in one of my study halls and he always gets picked on cause he does all this stuff that's really weird. I think our school's pretty safe. Some people can get violent in this school, but there's not very many of them. You hear people threaten to kill each other or kill themselves. I ask if they're really serious and if they are… I try to help them out (Lizzie, 15).

In terms of safety, students categorized people who they felt potentially threatened their security. The list included "Goths, Kids who are Different, Druggies, Hicks and Scrubs, Athletes, and Bullies". The students also included teachers, as a group who can made them feel unsafe.

Peer predictability was critical to the adolescents when they felt they could not count on the adults in the setting to provide the level of safety that they needed and expected while at school. As in any system where those who are purportedly in charge abrogate their responsibilities, other participants in the system will do what they can to fill in the gaps (Warren, et al, 1998; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). In this case, children elected to attempt to protect themselves at school primarily by continual monitoring and evaluation of their peers. Because school personnel were not predictable in their means or times of intervention for an orderly

environment, students provided this for themselves by observing, categorizing, and eventually predicting the attitudes and behaviors of their classmates. The mechanism of peer predictability lends a large measure of safety and security to teenagers in school.

Adolescents' Solutions for School Safety

The teenagers in this investigation generated numerous interesting and creative suggestions to bolster school safety and to decrease violence at schools in general. Interestingly, the majority were opposed to technological interventions such as metal detectors and surveillance cameras. They cited the prison-like atmosphere created by these devices. Further, they commented that hi-tech "solutions" encourage some students to bring weapons to school just to see if they can get them by the detectors. The solutions they offered included:

1. A personal commitment by both students and teachers to make the school environment better by "being nicer" to everyone at school. This was discussed in terms of demonstrating "caring" for others and also in terms of being more "inclusive" of the "loners" in the school.

2. Providing the opportunity for each student to participate in a group "with a worthy goal." This could mean a sports team or a service project.

3. The need for great adult supervision- Approximately three-quarters of the students in the focus groups and 80% of the students in individual interviews cited the need for more attention by adults in order to ensure the safety of the environment. (This finding may seem surprising to many adults who believe that adolescents are resentful of adult intervention in their lives. However, it was clear that the students were willing to forgo some freedoms in order to feel secure at school.)

4. Character education or other life skills courses that center on treating others with respect

and taking responsibility. Students thought these courses, which deal with moral issues, should be started in elementary school.

5. Building design- I asked the students: "If you could design a safe school building what would you do?" They cited some of the following:

   a) Eliminate secluded places in the building.

   b) Make sure that all areas can be seen and supervised by an adult

   c) Build wider hallways (so students don't bump and bully one another there)

   d) Create many safe exists from each room (since the publicity of past school shootings, students said they now check for all exists when they enter any room)

   e) Place firemen's ladders at each window for ease of exit

   f) Build small schools (so adults know what is going on)

   g) Build school classrooms around a central court yard so there are no hallways (just a court yard to cross in between classes thereby eliminating hallways and reducing the supervision problems students report there)

It is evident from the students' solutions how profoundly they were affected by viewing the tragic shooting at Columbine High School. Their ideas encompass strategies for prevention and for escape. The experience endured by the students in Littleton was a clear precipitant for many of the ideas stated above.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The findings from this study speak very strongly to the need for systemic change. At the

heart of the change process is the urgency for educators and policy makers to recognize the damaging immediate and potential long-term consequences of bullying behaviors. Teasing, bullying, and harassing whether verbal, psychological, sexual, or physical must not be tolerated as a part of the culture of our nation's schools. We must resolve to follow the lead of European and other civilized countries (Smith et al., 1999) and provide our children with an emotionally safe work setting. Sending children to an environment in which they will be taunted and bullied on a regular basis simply cannot be permitted. The costs are great. Further, like viewing an iceberg, we are not as yet fully cognizant of the scope of problems engendered in our children by exposure to these unacceptable behaviors. At this time, the school as a system is allowing bullying in many and various forms- verbal, sexual, physical, emotional. It is often overlooked or permitted under the auspices of "it's always been this way", "that's just how it is with kids", and worst of all "there's no harm to it." Though school districts do understand that they can no longer permit sexual harassment or risk losing Title IX funding (Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Gorney, 1999; Harachi, et al., 1999). A major part of the problem of interrupting bullying is in its definition and subsequent identification. In our country, we define very few behaviors at the high school level as bullying. On top of that, we accept bullying by some groups of people, for example athletes or other student body leaders, without attaching many consequences. We have not recognized that victims of what may seem like "typical adolescent stuff" can turn into "your worst nightmare" as the students in this study indicated. Somehow, educators, parents, and all community stakeholders expect that the children will sort it out themselves. The manner in which some children sort it out is by feeling unsafe much or all of the time, by dropping out, by skipping school, or by using alcohol and other substances (deLara, 2000). Some adolescents sort it out by deciding not to "take it" anymore and they become perpetrators of large-scale violence at their schools.

Adults in the system are not aware of the cyclical nature of the victim-bully interaction. It

is discouraging to hear educators and mental health professionals asking, "Is he a bully or a victim?" My experience and research with children indicates that there are very few who are exclusively bullies or strictly victims. Oftentimes, when a child is victimized by a bully, his or her response is to bully back or to bully someone else. School personnel need to understand this dynamic in order to effectively intervene and eliminate bullying conduct in the school. It is necessary to do this for many reasons not the least of which is to eliminate secondary traumatization generated in those children who are innocent bystanders. They witness bullying and thus feel unsafe. This is exacerbated if the bullying goes unchallenged by those in authority on whom the children count for protection.

Students identified teachers and other adults as bullies based on their intimidating and harassing actions. Engaging in bullying or psychologically intimidating behavior must be seen as unacceptable for school personnel. Adults have to come to agreement on this concept and determine a policy to replace it. In order to do so, school personnel must ask the questions of themselves: What is the purpose of intimidation? Does it, in fact, serve the same function as "I can hit you but don't get the idea that you can hit anyone else." (This sentiment is similar to findings in studies conducted by Hyman & Perone, 1998 and by Hyman & Snook, 1999)

The majority of teenagers mentioned attending high school in a small (around 500-student) facility as a component of feeling safe at school. The policy recommendation is obvious from these data. Other studies have pointed out that students can feel redundant in large schools (Barker & Gump, 1964) or superfluous (Garbarino, 1980). In this study, students discussed the aspects of feeling safe at school that were associated with small school size. Although school district planning must respect the constraints of the budget, the best interests of the students in a district are not served if they are afraid and anxious during the day while they are attempting to learn. Many researchers have documented the correlation between fearfulness or victimization at

school and impaired learning (Baker & Mednick, 1990; Hoffman, 1996; Kingery, Pruitt, Brizzola, & Heuberger, 1996). The data in this inquiry cite a number of means that adolescents utilized to escape feeling fearful while at school. These included absenteeism, being in a gang, and carrying a weapon to school. Clearly, these are not ideal ways to deal with feeling fearful during the school day. Policymakers at the local, state, and national levels need to realize the impact- both emotional and financial- of student mechanisms to provide safety for themselves and their friends. Having an accurate awareness of the price of student attempts to provide for their own safety would be useful in the battle for small schools.

In instances where policy change has not caught up with student population need, the "house" concept or school-within- a-school concept can be implemented by committed administrators for the benefit of the children and the community (Garbarino, 1999).

Embedded in the premise of listening to students is the notion that students must be viewed as full partners (though not fully responsible) in planning for a safe school. Some researchers believe that the first priority in developing a safe school is to gain student support for the concept, plan, and implementation (Crews & Count, 1997; Comer, 1993). Local and state policies should reflect students' voices and provide representation in policymaking and program design for safe and non-violent schools. It is sensible to include adolescents in planning for their workplace, especially since they are more cognizant of the issues that affect their sense of safety than anyone else.

Schools need to accept the fact that adolescents DO need more attention, caring, supervision, and mentoring than is popularly believed to be the case. The teenagers in this study supplied ample evidence of this reality in their comments. For change at the local level, school

administrators must design supervision strategies and intervention plans that take these requirements of adolescents into account. When adolescents give direct or indirect clues that they feel uncomfortable in some areas of the school, administrators need to devise a plan to correct this, not decide that there is no reason for the students to feel uncomfortable or insecure and therefore do nothing.

School boards, in supporting policy for increased and improved supervision, caring, and mentorship, need to furnish the financial means to hire more teachers, hire mental health personnel, and provide in service programs for instituting caring communities in the schools. School board policy must require districts to evaluate caring community programs once they are instituted in their schools. At the state level, departments of education have to re-evaluate the focus that has been taken towards educating the whole child. If the goal to educate the whole child is to be accomplished, state education policy makers must understand the place of school safety in children's ability to concentrate and learn. State policy makers need to see a connection between children who feel unsafe at school, and children who are "troublemakers" at school, children who are underachievers, and children who drop out of school.

At the local level, the state level, and the national level, educators, parents, and policy makers need to engage in a national discussion on the topic of teacher professionalism. Everyday new teachers are educated in our colleges without benefit of any resolution, and sometimes without benefit of any mention, about teacher professionalism with regard to the critical issues of children's safety, school as a caring community, and in general, the expectations that American parents will have for them as guardians of their children. Americans send children to school expecting them to learn and to be safe. At this time, teachers are being trained to teach so that children can learn academically. Teachers are not being adequately trained in our colleges to

keep children safe from either verbal or physical abuse, or from more major incidents of serious danger. Is that part of their job or not? The majority of adolescents in this study clearly thought so. When teachers and other adults in the schools do not live up to this expectation, the safety of the school is compromised. In the meantime, adults have not decided what to think about this subject. Teachers are divided about what they consider to be their responsibility. Those teachers who are unambiguous about their responsibility to protect children from being seriously harmed at school (like some of the teachers at Columbine) are seen as heroes. All teachers do not want to be heroes or to risk their lives. As long as teachers and administrators are unclear or ambiguous about what is expected behavior and what constitutes "professionalism" there will be an uneven response in the schools to all levels of abusive and aggressive behavior. Uneven, ambiguous responses are unpredictable responses. Unpredictable responses are red flags leading to insecurity for adolescents.

The aim of this research was to capture the voices of the adolescents in the environment being studied. In understanding their perspective on safety at school—what enhances it, what compromises it—adults in the school system have the opportunity to empower the students for change. Incorporating the ideas of the students as well as their ongoing input into the process of gathering data facilitates communication among the adolescents, teachers, administrators, and other staff. It is certainly critical to implement the worthy ideas and strategies that the students formulate and not merely listen to their communications. Collaborative investigation and interpretation of the data are strengths for the school as an organization and for this research project in particular.

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